

ACEH IN HISTORY: Preserving Traditions and Embracing Modernity

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Abstrak: Aceh dalam Sejarah: Mempertahankan Tradisi dan Mengawal Modernitas. Tulisan ini berupaya mendiskusikan secara kritis tentang bagaimana masyarakat Aceh dalam sejarah, sementara mencoba menyesuaikan diri dengan dunia modern, mereka melakukan segala upaya untuk mempertahankan tradisi. Sebagai sebuah etnik yang memiliki masa lalu yang gemilang, Aceh senantiasa memiliki keterikatan kuat dengan “identitas”, dan hal ini dituangkan dalam banyak hal, termasuk “ingatan sosial.” Untuk itu, “tradisi”, digali dan dipertahankan. Namun, tantangan modernitas juga merupakan hal yang harus direspon dan disikapi. Dalam konteks inilah kelihatannya masyarakat Aceh berada di persimpangan jalan. Di satu pihak mereka berupaya mempertahankan tradisi yang telah ada namun juga harus melibatkan diri dalam kehidupan modern. Penulis menyimpulkan bahwa masyarakat Aceh masih menemukan kesulitan dalam hal ini, karena mereka masih terpaku kepada “romantisasi sejarah”, bukan “kesadaran sejarah”, sehingga “ruh” masa lalu belum mampu dibawa ke masa kini.

Abstract: This paper attempts to critically discuss on how the Acehnese in history, while trying to embrace the modern world, have made every effort at preserving their traditions. As an ethnic group which has a glorious past, Aceh has strongly been connected to “identity”; and this is expressed in various means, including “social memory.” For this very reason, “traditions”, including those of the past, are explored and preserved. Yet, the challenges of modernity are also apparent. It is in this context that the Acehnese are trapped at the crossroad. On the one hand, they tend to preserve their traditions, yet, on the other, they need to embrace modern lives. The Acehnese seem to have encountered considerable obstacles on this issue, for they tend to focus more on historical “romanticism” (nostalgia) rather than historical “awareness” (consciousness). Eventually, the “spirit” of the past cannot be brought into light.

Keywords: Aceh, history, traditions, modernity

Introduction

As a province within the Republic of Indonesia, Aceh has been regarded as a unique region. This brand is not without its reasons. In history, Aceh was known as a powerful and prosperous Islamic kingdom (sultanate) in the western archipelago. As the champion of Islam, it played significant roles in propagating the religion in the surrounding areas and contributing significantly to the development of the Islamic-Malay culture. During its heydays as a sultanate, Aceh played major roles in the region's economic and political constellation; it was even engaged in trade competition in the far remote areas, such as the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea. Diplomatic relations with major powers in the region and European countries were established. In the meantime, Aceh's military power was respected by both neighboring states and the Europeans. The long military encounter between Aceh and the Portuguese during the sixteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth century showed its strong military capability, which was driven by its people's strong Islamic commitment. Indeed, as Richard V. Weeks has astutely suggested, "adherence to Islam is perhaps the primary factor in a person's self identification as Acehnese...".¹

In addition to the impressive achievements that it successfully secured in the past, especially during the course of the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, Aceh has also experienced unprecedented historical dynamics. In the following eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, the sultanate had to struggle for survival in many ways, mainly in political, economic and even military terms. To some degree, its intellectual role in the Malay world also declined. Yet, their military and political struggles against the European powers, especially the Dutch, proved that the Acehnese were still powerful. Early twentieth century shows the Acehnese efforts at encountering with modernity; and this was later followed by the transformation of the region into a newly established state, the Republic of Indonesia. This marks the new era of its history.

The dynamics of Aceh's history show some "continuity" and "discontinuity," and this is the nature of the history itself. Yet, one thing that one might have noticed among the Acehnese recently is that there has been a lasting consciousness of being Acehnese. In other words, the people of the region are proud to be called the "Acehnese"; and this very fact has its far reaching impacts on their modern history. The main bulk of this paper will be devoted to a concise discussion on how the Acehnese in history, while trying to embrace the modern world, have made every effort at preserving their traditions. This will be done in the first place by enquiring into the Acehnese identity.

¹Richard V. Weeks, *Muslim People: A World Ethnographic Survey*, Vol. I (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1984), p. 3.

Aceh as an Identity

What does it mean to be the Acehnese? This is an important point to discuss here briefly, for it has something to do with identity. One of the many interesting phenomena of the Acehnese is the fact that even though Aceh has now become one of the provinces under the administration of the Republic of Indonesia, they are still proud of themselves as an ethnic group. The same notion is certainly to be found in other ethnic groups, as hundreds of ethnic groups are now living under the Republic, including Aceh. Yet, Aceh occupies a special status within the nation, a fact that owes much to its remarkable history. The region is considered to be the place where Islam first came and established itself as an Islamic kingdom. Its major contributions in Islamic terms are to be seen not only in its role in propagating Islam as a new faith in the archipelago, but also in enriching Islamic-Malay cultures and traditions. This eventually made it as the stronghold of the new faith and the champion of Islam.

An Islamic-based resistance against the colonial power was shown by the Acehnese, especially during the war against the Dutch from the end of the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, which is known as the longest and the bloodiest war that the European power had ever experienced in the Netherland East Indies. In the meantime, the Acehnese also worked together with other people in other regions in an effort to drive the colonial power out of the region and played significant role in creating a new nation-state, called the Republic of Indonesia. Interestingly, it was towards the central government of the newly-established nation that the Acehnese rebelled, in an effort to win independence for the region as an Islamic state from 1953 to 1962. This was then followed by a similar political and armed movement for the Acehnese independence, known as *Gerakan Aceh Merdeka* (GAM, Free Aceh Movement). Founded in 1976, this movement was engaged in extended armed conflict with the Indonesian military until the signing of the Helsinki agreement in 2005. This is indeed a unique and, somehow, tragic story of the Acehnese, which leads us to consider them as a *distinct* society.

At this point, let us pose a fundamental question on this issue: *what does Aceh mean?* This is not easy question to answer, since there has been no definite and simple definition of Aceh provided by scholars. C. Snouck Hurgronje discusses this issue concisely in his monumental work on this people. There is no need to reiterate his words on this point. Yet, one thing that might be useful to note here is that Snouck, by referring to the well-known *ulama* and war leader Tengku Kutakarang (d. 1895), mentions a popular belief among the Acehnese that their ancestors are composed of various elements, mainly the Arabs, the Persians and the Turks.² Although this belief is not supported by reliable sources, there must be some truth in it. As a matter of fact, there is no homogeneous physical appearance

²C. Snouck Hurgronje, *The Acehnese*, trans. by A.W.S. O'Sullivan, Vol. I (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1906), p. 18.

of the Acehnese, as some of them look like the Arabs and even the Europeans, while others, even mostly, look like those who are originated from South Asia. Geographical factor was also to play its parts. Located in the northernmost part of Sumatra facing the Indian Ocean, the ports of Aceh were frequently visited by people from all around the world. Traces of outsiders' cultures are evident, suggesting the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural nature of the Acehnese.

There is another way of defining Aceh, namely by limiting the Acehnese to those who speak local dialect, known as *Aceh dialect*. This being the case, only those who speak the dialect are considered to be the Acehnese, while those who speak other dialects within the region, such as Gayo and Malay (Tamiang), are excluded from it. This definition is certainly *unhistorical* and *misleading*. At the end of the 19th century, the Acehnese, according to Snouck, referred to themselves in accordance with the territorial boundaries of the sultanate, ranging from Tamiang on the East Coast to "far more to the South on the Western Coast, viz... Baros or whatever other point they regard as marking the boundary between the territory of the princes of Menangkabau and that of the Sultans of Acheh."³ This is clearly the territorial-based definition, which includes all other ethnic groups and their own dialects, cultures and traditions. Another definition of Aceh given by G.P. Tolson is worth quoted here. He writes that, in precise terms, Aceh "is the correct name of that part of Sumatra extended from Tamiang point on the east to Trumon on the west coast,..."⁴

All the above mentioned definitions have one main point in common, namely the term "Acehnese" referred to those who lived in the region that is now known as the province of Aceh; and they consisted of people of various ethnic groups, including—among others—Gayo, Tamiang (Malay), though the dominant group of the region were those who speak *Aceh dialect*. Yet, we have to go back to history in order to be able to grasp a more comprehensive definition of Aceh.

Aceh was originally the name of a small kingdom in Dar al-Kamal, the hinterland located about one mile from the coast at the northern tip of the region.⁵ As an inland kingdom, it was neither known nor visited by many foreign travelers. It was only after its unification with Lamuri of Mahkota Alam around the end of the fifteenth century or early sixteenth century that the early signs of the emergence of Aceh are observable.⁶ This is considered to be the beginning of the new era of the kingdom. Its first sultan was 'Ali Mughayat Shah

³*Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁴G.P. Tolson, "Acheh, Commonly Called Acheen," in *JSBRAS* 5 (1880), p. 37. See also T.C.R. Westpalm, "Geography of Achin," trans. by Bierber, in *JSBRAS* 3 (1879), pp. 120-123; William Marsden, *The History of Sumatra*, a reprint of the third edition, intro. by John Bastin (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 396.

⁵Teuku Iskandar, *De Hikajat Atjeh* ('s-Gravenhage: N.V. De Nederlandsche Boek-en Steendrukkerij VH. HL. Smits, 1959), p. 31.

⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 31-32, 37.

(d. 1530), who later conquered Daya (west coast) in 1520, Pidie in 1521 and Pasai in 1524. It was only after the inclusion of all these earlier Islamic kingdoms into the Acehnese state that the popular name of the kingdom, i.e. Aceh Dar al-Salam, came into being.⁷ R.O. Winstedt calls the new kingdom as “Greater Aceh.”⁸

The conquest of these three kingdoms by ‘Ali Mughayat Shah was absolutely essential for the later development of this newly fledged state. All of them were well known not only as important international ports and trade centers but also producers of several natural resources, including pepper, rice, silk and even benzoin. Pasai was even well known as a center for Islamic learning and Malay culture. The rulers of Aceh Dar al-Salam had successfully administered all these potentials and resources and were determined to continue their predecessors’ legacy. This was among the main reasons behind the spectacular rise of the newly established state in early sixteenth century.

The Acehnese sultanate continued to prosper and reached its zenith in the seventeenth century. Banda Aceh became an important port and a cosmopolitan city, where people from various ethnic groups came and lived. It also became the center of Malay culture, since Malay was adopted as an official language of the state, not Acehnese language (local dialect). Eventually, Aceh was able to contribute significantly to the development of the Malay language and literature, especially in cultural and Islamic terms.⁹ Islamic learning was so prosperous that a large number of works of different fields of Islam were produced there in Malay language. Islam was adopted and adapted in the state, and it even became the foundation of the state cultures and traditions. Indeed, Islam constituted a “binding element” in the heterogeneous and multicultural nature of the Acehnese state.¹⁰

Therefore, to explore more about Aceh in the past, once needs to perceive it from three perspectives. The first is Aceh as an ethnic group with its own characteristics (even though it consists of several sub-ethnic groups). Secondly, it should also be seen as a part of Southeast Asian community. The third is it needs to be viewed as a part of the Islamic world. All these elements were to play their parts in shaping the Acehnese identity.

That being the case, it becomes easier now to propose the definition of Aceh, that is the region of the northernmost part of Sumatra whose people were heterogeneous,

⁷Nur al-Din al-Raniri, *Bustanu’s-Salatin*, bab 2, Pasal 13, ed. by T. Iskandar (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 1966), pp. 22, 31. See also Raden Hoesein Djajadiningrat, “Critisch overzicht van de in Malaische werken vervatte over de geschiedenis van het Soeltanat van Atjeh,” in *BKI* 65 (1911), p. 152; Iskandar, *De Hikajat Atjeh*, p. 38.

⁸R.O. Winstedt, “The Early Rulers of Perak, Pahang and Acheh,” in *JMBRAS* 10 (1932), p. 43.

⁹For further discussion on this issue, see Leonard Y. Andaya, “Aceh’s Contribution to Standards of Malayness,” in *Archipel* 61 (2001), pp. 29-68.

¹⁰For further discussion on this matter, see Amirul Hadi, *Islam and State in Sumatra: A Study of Seventeenth Century Aceh* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

multicultural, committed Muslims, and whose identity was strongly connected to Islam. Islam is believed to have played substantial roles in shaping the Acehnese community, cultures and traditions. All of these have become the fundamentals of Acehnese identity, which are Islamic, plural and tolerant. One might question this definition, as it might seem too idealistic and historical. Yet, these are the points that the Acehnese believe to have in mind and their memories.

Both “Islam” and the “Acehnese” continue to become key concepts in the mind of the Acehnese in modern times. These two conceptions are believed to be the main issues behind the “social revolution” of 1946¹¹ and the Acehnese rebellion against Jakarta under the banner of the Darul Islam from 1953 to 1962. It was to meet these demands that the central government issued the decree of 1959, known as “Special Region” (*Daerah Istimewa*), allowing the province to have an extended autonomy (*otonomi yang seluas-luasnya*) in conducting their own affairs, mainly in *religion, tradition and education*.¹² Similar tone is also provided in the government decree of 1999,¹³ 2001,¹⁴ and even 2006.¹⁵ All these documents constitute the responses to the strong commitment of the Acehnese to maintain their identity.

Traditions *versus* Modernity

One thing that one might observe of the Acehnese is that they have strong collective memories (social memories) of their past, especially the seventeenth century Aceh. Particular emphasis is given to the reign of Iskandar Muda (r. 1607-1637), when the sultanate was at its zenith. Therefore, the seventeenth century Aceh becomes the ideal model that the Acehnese wish to achieve. The question that should be raised here is that: *is it possible for the Acehnese to realize the desire?* In the following paragraphs we shall provide a brief survey on the efforts of the Acehnese in securing their traditions in the modern world. Of course, not all traditions of the Acehnese will be presented here, for the space will not allow us to do so. Therefore, only few main examples will be discussed here.

As Aceh is identical with Islam, this religion became the foundation of its social and political lives. As an Islamic kingdom, the ruler (sultan) was seen as *khalîfah Allâh fî al-Ardh* (the deputy of God on earth) or *Zhill Allâh fî al-Ardh* (the shadow of God on earth). In a traditional Islamic state, ruler was always placed at the pinnacle of the state hierarchy and was seen to symbolize the unity of state. These two were in fact inseparable in that

¹¹Eric Morris, “Aceh: Social Revolution and the Islamic Vision,” in Audrey R. Kahin, (ed.), *Regional Dynamics of the Indonesian Revolution: Unity from Diversity* (Honolulu: University of Hawai Press, 1985), pp. 87-91.

¹²Surat Keputusan Perdana Menteri Republik Indonesia Nomor 1/Missi/1959.

¹³Undang-Undang Nomor 44 Tahun 1999.

¹⁴Undang-Undang Nomor 18 Tahun 2001.

¹⁵Undang-Undang Republik Indonesia Nomor 11 Tahun 2006.

they were integrated in the concept of the “politico-religious unity” of the *ummah*. Briefly, the state was the ruler himself, and *vice versa*. Therefore, an attack on ruler means an assault not only on the state itself but also on Islam, as the ruler was the holder of “religiously-sanctioned authority,” or as the one through whom the implementation of God’s religion would be realized.¹⁶

It is this concept of ruler, though in its modern form, that is still to be observed in the Acehnese modern history. The attack of the Dutch on Aceh’s soil, which officially began on March 26th 1873, meant an assault on Islam itself, and therefore *jihad* should be carried out by any Muslim, since it was a *fardh ‘ayn* (individually incumbent duty). It is this religious concept that lay behind the long and severe war waged by the Acehnese.¹⁷ The religious nature and duties of ruler or leader in Aceh is also to be seen during post colonial times. Acehnese leaders demanded the central government to officially authorize the implementation of the *shari’ah* in the province. The rejection of the central government of the demand and the inclusion of the region into the province of North Sumatra eventually led the Acehnese to rebel against Jakarta, as mentioned earlier. These are the examples of the continuation of the old concept of the role of state in implementing the *shari’ah*.

In the Acehnese past, Islam became a “binding element” among the people. The concept of Islamic brotherhood was in place in the sultanate. It was therefore any Muslim, regardless of his/her ethnic origins, could live in Aceh and even some of them occupied key positions in the sultanate, such as Nur al-Din al-Raniri, a Gujarati by origins. Having foreign-born rulers in the sultanate was a common phenomenon. In the sixteenth century two Aceh’s rulers were foreign origins, namely Sultan ‘Ala’ al-Din (r. 1579-1586), the son of Mansur Shah of Perak, and Sultan ‘Ala’ al-Din Ri’ayat Shah (r. 1586-1589), the son of Munawwar Shah of Indera Pura (West Sumatra). Iskandar Thani (r. 1636-1641), the husband of Safiyyat al-Din, was in fact the son of Sultan Ahmad X of Pahang. Both Arab and Bugis dynasties were also to rule Aceh in the eighteenth century.

However, the role of Islam as a binding element in the region is being questioned recently. Somehow the Acehnese are portrayed as less tolerant, closed-minded, and even anti-strangers. These negative stigmas of the Acehnese are not without reasons, as few cases show that new comers or outsiders are not welcome, even though they are Muslims. This happened mainly during the times of conflict. Indeed, this is not the nature of the Acehnese society, as they still hold the tradition of respecting guest (*peumulia jamee*). In fact, some of the province’s populations are non-Acehnese by origins. Nevertheless, the Acehnese have yet to become an open society, as it is the case with some other societies. Their historical background plays its role in this case. The long colonial war against the Dutch was to have its deep impacts in destroying people’s lives. This was followed by a

¹⁶See Hadi, *Islam and State*, esp. Chapter Two and Three.

¹⁷Amirul Hadi, “Exploring Acehnese Understandings of *Jihad*: A Study of *Hikayat Prang Sabi*,” in R. Michael Feener, *et al.*, (ed.), *Mapping the Acehnese Past* (Leiden: KITLV, 2011), pp. 183-198.

number of military conflicts during the course of the twentieth century, leaving the society in isolation and backwardness with little room for recovery and development.

This issue brings us to the intellectual traditions that the region had in the past. One of the impressive achievements of the Acehese state in the past, especially in the sixteenth and the seventeenth century, was in intellectual traditions. Aceh rose as the center of learning, to which people from the archipelago and even from Muslim world came. The ulama wrote many books. Islamic discourses were taking place not only in mosques and schools but also in royal palace, suggesting the royal patronage of learning; and this indeed played significant role in advancing the intellectual traditions in the sultanate. Aceh also took another brilliant measure in this issue, namely by adopting the intellectual traditions of its predecessor, especially those of Pasai.

Perhaps, one of the most interesting steps taken by the Acehese rulers was the adoption of Malay as an official language of the state. It did have far reaching impacts, not only in economic and political terms, but also in intellectual discourses. All the works written in Aceh were widely read by students throughout Nusantara. It is in this sense that the Acehese played a role in enriching the Malay and made it the language of the Islamic learning. The other role in this case was also to be seen in Acehese efforts at coloring the Malay literatures and cultures with Islamic flavors.¹⁸

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries demonstrated the decline of Aceh's economic and political roles in the region. Yet, the intellectual traditions continued to play their roles, though in a more limited scale. Islamic scholars were to continue their predecessors' footsteps in teaching and producing works. Among the prominent ulama of this era were Jalal al-Din al-Turasani, Muhammad Zayn al-Asyi, Muhammad al-Langgini, Abbas al-Asyi (Tengku Kutakarang) and Ismail al-Asyi.¹⁹ These scholars wrote their works both in Aceh dialect and Arabic. Nevertheless, substantial decrease of works, both in number and quality, produced in Aceh was evident. Acehese scholars tended to write their works in local dialect rather than in Malay, as it ceased to be the official language of the state. Therefore, the circulation of their works was only to meet local needs, except few works which were written in Arabic and printed in the Arab land.

The long military encounter with the Dutch had left the Acehese without having good education. The Islamic learning and its intellectual traditions could not be pursued, since the ulama and their students were engaged in war. It was only about five decades later that the Acehese were eventually able to focus on educational programs, represented by All-Aceh Union of Ulama (PUSA, Persatuan Ulama Seluruh Aceh)—this was besides the

¹⁸Andaya, "Aceh's Contribution," pp. 29-68; Amirul Hadi, *Aceh: Sejarah, Budaya dan Tradisi* (Jakarta: Yayasan Pustaka Obor, 2011), especially chapter V.

¹⁹For further discussion on this issue, see Erawadi, *Tradisi, Wacana dan Dinamika Intelektual Islam Aceh Abd XVIII dan XIX* (Jakarta: Badan Litbang dan Diklat, Departemen Agama RI, 2009).

existing traditional boarding schools (*dayahs*) throughout Aceh area. Compared to other regions in the area, Aceh was far behind in starting the worldwide Islamic modernist movement. By the time the modernist movement entered Indonesia (first to Minangkabau) at the end of the nineteenth century,²⁰ Aceh was still at war with the Dutch. It was only in 1939 that PUSA was established in Aceh.

PUSA was the first organization of its type in Aceh. As a modernist movement, PUSA was intended in the first place to strengthen the implementation of Islam in the region. This also includes the purification of Islam. Inspired by the modernist idea from the Middle East, the PUSA ulama also attempted to deliver their agendas through education, and therefore one of their programs was to establish modern Islamic schools in the region. Yet, PUSA was also seen as an Acehnese movement with local contents and agendas. Its grave concerns for social condition of the Acehnese had led this organization to carry out socio-political agendas. Even, PUSA was also involved in military movement. This organization was successful in its missions. Many future ulama and leaders of Aceh were also the products of PUSA. It is for this very reason that scholars suggest that PUSA was the Acehnese model of a socio-religious and political organization.²¹

The brief survey of the intellectual traditions in Aceh from its heyday in the sixteenth and the seventeenth century until the rise of PUSA in the first half of the twentieth century leads us to question ourselves: *where are we now?* History proves significant decline of the intellectual traditions in this region recently. The worse period was certainly during the long war with the Dutch. Even though the current condition of education in Aceh is getting better than that of few decades ago, yet it is still below the national standard, not to compare with that of the seventeenth century. We certainly cannot go back to the history, but there is the “intellectual spirit” of the past that should be grasped and followed.

Talking about Islamic learning, intellectual traditions and the *syari'ah*, we have to refer to the ulama, as the holders of religious authority. They are learned- men or the scholars of Islam. Therefore, in any Muslim society the ulama played central roles. The prominent roles played by the ulama were apparent in Aceh's history. They were highly respected by the rulers of Pasai. The same picture was also to be seen later in Aceh. The seventeenth century Aceh shows the notable status of the ulama, as they not only occupied the highest position in religious hierarchy in the sultanate as *syaikh al-Islâm* and spiritual leader but also acted as advisers to the ruler and even functioned as chief councilors, as in the case of Shams al-Din al-Sumatrani (d.1630). Other prominent ulama in the seventeenth century

²⁰Deliar Noer, *Gerakan Modern Islam di Indonesia. 1900-1942* (Jakarta: LP3ES, 1980), pp. 38-65.

²¹For further discussion on this issue, see Harry J. Benda, “South-East Asian Islam in the Twentieth Century,” in P. M. Holt, *et al.* (ed.). *The Cambridge History of Islam*, Vol. 2A (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 182-208; Agus Budi Wibowo, *et al.*, *Dinamika dan Peran PUSA dalam Kehidupan Sosial Budaya Masyarakat Aceh* (Banda Aceh: Balai Kajian Sejarah dan Nilai Tradisional Banda Aceh, 2005).

Aceh were Nur al-Din al-Raniri (d. 1658) and 'Abd al-Ra'uf al-Singkili (d. 1693). Other ulama also played important roles in state and society with different functions and positions.²²

In Aceh's history, the ulama symbolized the spiritual dimension of the state, while the ruler was the head of the state. The former was the holder of religious authority, while the latter was the one who possessed the authority to lead the state. Yet, the latter's authority also contained religious meaning, known as a "religiously-sanctioned authority." The harmonious collaboration between them was evident, and it was only when the ruler ceased to exist that the ulama took his position. This was apparent during the Acehese war against the Dutch. When the last ruler of Aceh, Muhammad Daud Shah, was exiled to Ambon in 1907, the ulama took the control of the war, especially Tengku Chik Di Tiro and Tengku Chik Kutakarang.²³

During the post war, the role of the ulama in Acehese society was increasingly central. Their prominent roles were seen not only in dealing with religious matters but also in social and political issues. They themselves led the war against the colonial power, those who were considered traitors (in the case of the social revolution), and even the central government (such as the Tgk. Daud Beureu'eh's DI TII rebellion). All of these were conducted under the banner of Islam and the Acehese (humanity and justice).²⁴

However, signs of the decline of their roles are to be observed in contemporary Acehese society. Their roles are confined to religious matters, having no power of execution as such. This can be seen in the case of the Council of the Ulama (MPU, Majelis Permusyawaratan Ulama). It is a normative body which is in charge of issuing *fatwa* (religious legal opinion) and *taushiyah* (religious recommendation). Other ulama organizations are traditional boarding school based bodies, such as the Union of the Ulama of Acehese Dayah (HUDA, Himpunan Ulama Dayah Aceh) and Inshafuddin. These two organizations administer and supervise Islamic boarding schools (*dayah*) in Aceh, and in many cases also issue *fatwa* and *taushiyah* (recommendation).

No matter how limited their formal positions are, the ulama are still influential in society, especially those of the *dayah*-based. Their role as the guardians of the faith is still apparent and powerful, mainly in rural areas. The *dayahs* constitute their main bases, where the process of the transformation of Islamic knowledge takes place. There are also some signs of their adoption of modernism, which would eventually make them closer to the modernist ulama. Yet, in general the roles of the ulama in Acehese society are declining, and modernism is among the main factors for this.

²²Hadi, *Islam and State*, especially Chapter Four.

²³Ibrahim Alfian, *Perang di Jalan Allah: Perang Aceh, 1873-1912* (Jakarta: Pustaka Sinar Harapan, 1987), p. 68, 151-173.

²⁴Alfian, "The Ulama in Acehese Society," in *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Sciences* 3, 1 (1975), pp. 27-41.

One of the most important, and probably controversial, issues in the contemporary Acehnese society is the topic of “gender” and the role of women in the public sphere. This is of course not a new issue, as it has been a hot topic in the modern world, including the Muslim world. Discourse on gender becomes a hot issue in Aceh during post-tsunami disaster of Desember 26th, 2004. The coming of the international community with their aids has to some degree changed the region’s looks, as it becomes prone to be influenced by outside’s cultures. As there is no place in this planet is able to escape from globalization, Aceh is no exception. Yet, the influx of outside’s cultures has been too sudden that the people are not well-prepared for it and are mostly in shock.

Recently, women, especially young generation, are more exposed to the public sphere. The tradition of strict gender relations has somehow been violated. The Acehnese young girls, mainly in urban areas, are now accustomed to enjoying themselves in cafe. Recent development shows a drastic raise of the number of divorce cases in Aceh, most of which are initiated by women. Calls for equal rights and opportunities between men and women have strongly been voiced by gender activists. These are few examples of recent development of gender issues in Aceh. A question should be raised here as to whether or not women are being discriminated against in the Acehnese society.

Aceh is well known for its tradition of having women to play significant roles in society. The best example of this is the rule of four queens (sultanahs) in the Acehnese state from 1641 to 1699. Among other prominent women in Aceh were Laksamana Keumala Hayati, a commander of Aceh’s navy during the reign of al-Mukammil (d. 1604),²⁵ Cut Meutia and Cut Nyak Dien (both the military commanders during the war against the Dutch) and others. Aceh was not alone in this case, as there were other regions in the area in which women played prominent roles, even, as in the case of Aceh, held power as rulers or the holders of power behind the throne. Between the second half of the fourteenth century and the first half of the fifteenth century Pasai experienced the rule of two queens: Nur Ilah (d. 1380) and Nahrasiyyah (d. 1428).²⁶ Starting from the fourteenth century, the kingdom of Bone in Sulawesi was ruled by six queens in all.²⁷ It is also well known that even though women never ruled Melaka, powerful ladies of the court were said to have played pivotal roles in the affairs of state.²⁸ A powerful queen Kali Nyamat ruled Japara during the third

²⁵John Davis, “The Voyage of Captaine John Davis to the Easterne India, Pilot in a Dutch Ship; Writen by Himself,” in *The Voyages and Works of John Davis the Navigator*, ed. by A. H. Markham (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1880), p. 150.

²⁶See Ibrahim Alfian, et al., (ed.), *Wanita Utama Nusantara dalam Lintasan Sejarah, or Prominent Women in the Glimpse of History* (Jakarta: Jayakarta Agung, 1994), pp. 1-13; H.K.J. Cowan, “Bijdrage tot de kennis der geschiedenis van het rijk Samoedra-Pase,” in *TBG* 78 (1938), pp. 209-210.

²⁷J. Brooke, *Narrative of Events in Borneo and Celebes down to the occupation of Labuan: From the Journals of J. Brooke... by Captain Rodney Mundy*, Vol. I (London: John Murray, 1848), pp. 74-75.

²⁸*Sejarah Malay or Malay Annals*, annot. and trans. by C.C. Brown, introd. by R. Roolvink (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 160-161; Cheach Boon Keng, “Power Behind

quarter of the sixteenth century.²⁹ Another best example of a state being ruled by queens was Patani, which came under consecutive rule of women from 1584 to 1688.³⁰ These are the best examples that show the significant roles that women played in both state and society. In his study on female roles in Southeast Asia in pre-colonial times Anthony Reid found the pivotal roles played by women in various areas, including family, economy, diplomacy, war, entertainment, and even politics.³¹

If the history shows the remarkable roles played by women in the past in the region, including Aceh, is it still the case at present time? In the case of Aceh, it certainly can be ascertained that it is still there. There is no tradition in the Acehnese society that denies women their own rights; nor there any discriminatory policy of any sorts taken by the local government against women. All men and women have their own responsibilities and functions in family and society. Yet, there is certainly no assurance that everything goes as it should have been. There is a possibility that domestic violence still takes place in society. This is in addition to the frequent practices—even it has become a custom—among some segments of society of denying women their own rights, including good education. The reason for this is that women would only be doing domestic works, regardless their educational background. Therefore, there is no need to grant them high education, for it is a waste of time, energy and money. This also means that women are denied the rights to play a role in public sphere. This tendency among some elements of society seems to have been driven mainly by their rigid interpretation of Islam.

It is appealing to learn how the Acehnese women in the past were to play pivotal roles in the public sphere, yet still kept the teachings of Islam consistently, as shown during the reigns of female rule in the seventeenth century. Due to the scanty of materials available at our disposal, we can only provide here some instances from the stately practices, not from society at large.

In general, there were no substantial differences in the ways of running the state between male and female rulers. The only differences are seen in some of traditions that were based on gender bases, especially from the Islamic point of view. Based on the teachings of Islam, *Taj al-Salatin*—a Southeast Asian variant of the mirrors work that was written

the Throne: The Role of Queens and Court Ladies in Malay History,” in *JMBRAS* 66 1 (1993), pp. 1-4.

²⁹H.J. de Graaf and Th.G.Th. Pigeaud, *De eerste Moslimse vorstendommen of Java* (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), pp. 103-107; idem, *Islamic States in Java 1500-1700* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976), p. 11.

³⁰Ibrahim Syukri, *History of the Malay Kingdom of Patani*, trans. by Connor Bailey and John N. Miksic (Athens, Ohio: Center for International Studies, Ohio University, 1985), pp. 22-38; *Hikayat Patani: The Story of Patani*, ed. by A. Teeuw and D.K. Wyatt (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970), pp. 13-20.

³¹Anthony Reid, “Female Roles in Pre-Colonial Southeast Asia,” in *Modern Asian Studies* 22, 3 (1988), pp. 629-645.

in Aceh in 1603—prescribes that a female ruler was neither to be seen in public, nor could she meet with any man face to face. Only her voice was allowed to be heard.³² Apparently, this ordinance was strictly followed by the queens. Speaking of the throne in their time, William Marsden insists that “a curtain of gauze was hung before it, which did not obstruct the audience, but prevented any perfect view.”³³ Thomas Bowrey, through his personal experience, provides an even more accurate description. At his audience with Queen Shafiyat al-Din, Bowrey found the female sovereign seated within a lodge. Therefore, anyone who had an audience with her had to sit facing this lodging. According to Bowrey, “she all the while looketh upon us, although wee cannot see her.”³⁴ Similar scene was also described by the English ambassadors on the throne of Queen Zakiyyat al-Din in 1684.³⁵ The tradition of the royal procession to the mosque every Friday was not conducted during the reigns of the four queens, as women have no religious obligation to perform Jum’ah prayer.³⁶

All the historical evidences mentioned above demonstrate that even though women played significant roles in the public sphere, they still kept their religious norms. This is perhaps good historical lessons that can be learned from the past. Yet, modernism with all its values has some impacts on the Acehnese society, including on the issue of gender. There are some signs of tendency towards the breakdown of traditional family in society. Young couples, for instance, tend to live in and focus more on “nuclear” rather than “extended” family. This is the nature of modern way of life, which is more individual rather than communal in outlook. The notion of togetherness in a big family has slowly eroded as a highly competitive life has becomes a new trend. The tradition of mutual-cooperation (*gotong royong* or *meuseuraya*) among society continues to decrease, especially in urban areas.

Indeed, traditional merits and practices are believed to have contained valuable solutions for modern problems. Therefore, efforts have been made by some people and local government at exploring and preserving customs, traditions and local wisdoms. Yet, the endeavors are yet to be successful, for they are not done in systematic and comprehensive manners. The formal institutions that are in charge of conducting the works are normative bodies, without having any executive power, as in the case of the Council of Acehnese Adat (MAA, Majelis Adat Aceh).

³²Bukhari al-Jawhari, *Taj al-Salatin (De kroon aller konigen)*, ed. and trans. into Dutch by PP Roorda van Eijsinga (Batavia: Lands Drukkerij, 1827), pp. 63-64; idem, *Taj al-Salatin*, ed. by Khalid Hussain (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 1966), pp. 64-65.

³³William Marsden, *The History of Sumatra*, a reprint from the 3rd edition, ed. and introd. by John Bastin (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 402.

³⁴Thomas Bowrey, *A Geographical Account of Countries Round the Bay of Bengal, 1669 to 1679*, ed. by R.C. Temple (Cambridge: Printed for the Hakluyt Society, 1905), pp. 307, 309.

³⁵Anthony Farrington (ed.), “Negotiations at Aceh in 1684: An Unpublished English Document,” in *Indonesia and the Malay World* 27 (1999), p. 25.

³⁶For further discussion on this issue, see Hadi, *Islam and State*, p. 123-146.

Closing Remarks

Traditions are no doubt a fundamental aspect of any society, as they are to form an identity. The Acehnese are fully aware of the importance of traditions in their lives. Therefore, they are proud of their own traditions, which have been handed down from their ancestors, by trying to preserve them. Yet, the question which should be raised here is that: do the Acehnese fully understand their own traditions?

The question is very much related to history, as tradition itself is handed down from one generation to another. While they are proud of their past traditions, the Acehnese seem not to know what really happened in the past. They are proud of their own history; and the seventeenth century Aceh, with its greatest ruler Sultan Iskandar Muda, occupies a special place in the memory of the Acehnese. But, they do not precisely know how the ruler achieved the remarkable reputation. The same case can also be said of the intellectual traditions of Aceh in the past. While the Acehnese are aware and proud of the intellectual achievement attained by their predecessors in the past, they do not exactly know how it took place. Eventually, they have never been able to grasp lessons from their own past.

That being the case, it is safe to suggest that the Acehnese are in general inclined to “social memory,” rather than “historical awareness,” two terms which are very much different from each other. While historical awareness is “to value the past for its own sake,”³⁷ social memory “reflects the rationale of popular knowledge about the past.”³⁸ It is this later tendency that is to be found in Aceh. In other words, the Acehnese are leaning towards having collective memory for the purpose of contemporary needs, including “sustaining a politically active identity.”³⁹ Indeed, respect for *tradition* is one of the main features of social memory,⁴⁰ and it touches many areas of life. In this sense, tradition is considered as a perfect precedent that should be a model for the present. Therefore, social memory is extremely selective in deciding which aspects of the past would be suitable for current social and political needs. In this respect John Tosh insists that “there is very little of the historical about appeals to tradition.”⁴¹ It is necessary for the Acehnese to discover more about their traditions through historical analysis. Otherwise, they would fall into *nostalgia* and *romanticism*.

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³⁷John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, revised third edition (London: Pearson Education Limited, 2002), p. 6.

³⁸*Ibid*, p. 3.

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⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁴¹*Ibid*.

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